GUNNING FOR GOD

JOHN C. LENNOX

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WHY THE NEW ATHEISTS ARE MISSING THE TARGET

LION

A Lion Book
an imprint of
Lion Hudson plc
Wilkinson House, Jordan Hill Road,
Oxford OX2 8DR, England
www.lionhudson.com
ISBN 978 0 7459 5322 9 (print)
ISBN 978 0 7459 5840 8 (epub)
ISBN 978 0 7459 5839 2 (Kindle)
ISBN 978 0 7459 5841 5 (pdf)

Distributed by:
UK: Marston Book Services, PO Box 269, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4YN
USA: Trafalgar Square Publishing, 814 N. Franklin Street, Chicago, IL 60610
USA Christian Market: Kregel Publications, PO Box 2607, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49501

First edition 2011
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0
First electronic format 2011

Acknowledgments

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A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

Typeset in 10.5/13 Palatino
Printed in Australia

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To my friends and colleagues
David Gooding, Michael Middleton, and
Arthur Williamson, with deep appreciation

INTRODUCTION

> **"Even if they can't be herded, cats in sufficient numbers can make a lot of noise and they cannot be ignored."**
> Richard Dawkins

> **"There's probably no God, now stop worrying and enjoy your life."**
> British Humanist bus advertising campaign

Atheism is on the march in the Western world. Noisily. A concerted attempt is still being made to marshal the atheist faithful, to encourage them not to be ashamed of their atheism but to stand up and fight as a united army. The enemy is God. They are gunning for God. The biggest gun, otherwise known as the former Oxford Professor of the Public Understanding of Science, has been Richard Dawkins. In 2005 he was voted by the magazine *Prospect UK* as one of the three leading public intellectuals in the world. His book *The God Delusion*,[1] published in 2006, has dominated best-seller lists and sold over 2 million copies in English alone.

However, there is now an even bigger gun, certainly so far as scientific credentials are concerned – the Cambridge theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking. For years Hawking appeared to have left the question of God open. At the end of his best-selling *A Brief History of Time* he wrote: "If we discover a complete theory… it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason – for then we would know the mind of God."[2] However, in his latest book, *The Grand Design*,[3] co-authored with Leonard Mlodinow, he claims there is now no room for God. Richard Dawkins is delighted, of course, and speaking of God

he says: "Darwin kicked him out of biology, but physics remained more uncertain. Hawking is now administering the coup de grâce."

Trailing behind Dawkins come a phalanx of lesser calibre but equally trigger-happy fusiliers. First, the highly articulate British-born, US-based Christopher Hitchens, a writer and professor of liberal studies in New York, who has written *God is not Great*.[4] Next is a scientist, Daniel Dennett, who produced *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*.[5] He describes himself as a "godless philosopher".[6] Finally, the more junior Sam Harris, a graduate in neuroscience, who has written *The End of Faith;*[7] *Letter to a Christian Nation,*[8] and, more recently, *The Moral Landscape.*[9]

The anti-God adrenalin is not only running in the English-speaking world. In France the most prominent activist is, unsurprisingly, not a scientist but a philosopher. He is the prolific author Michel Onfray, who has written *In Defence of Atheism*.[10] Dressed from head to foot in black, he regularly addresses overflowing crowds of eager listeners. In Italy the mathematician Piergiorgio Odifreddi has stirred up controversy with his essay *Why we cannot be Christians (much less Catholics)*.[11] The Vatican is not amused by his parody of the Latin blessing, in which he replaces the Trinity by Pythagoras, Archimedes, and Newton.

Dawkins hopes that he can orchestrate an atheist revival – although the task, he feels, is as tricky as the proverbial herding of cats: "Even if they can't be herded, cats in sufficient numbers can make a lot of noise and they cannot be ignored."[12] Well, he, as Cat herder-in-Chief, and his colleagues are certainly showing how to make plenty of noise. Whether that noise can be resolved into intelligible language is another matter entirely.

One attempt they have made to get their message across is by advertising it on the sides of buses. For a time bendy buses became the medium that carried the atheist message. They charged around the UK's major cities bringing the remarkably underwhelming missive: "There's probably no God, now stop worrying and enjoy your life." Apart from the advertisement for a well-known beer, there are probably very few advertisements containing the word "probably". After all, can one imagine being caught by advertisements like: "This medicine has probably no serious side effects…; this bank will probably not collapse…; this plane will probably get you to your destination"? Yet Richard Dawkins was prepared to dip into his own pocket to help finance the campaign.

Not to be outdone, German atheists, failing to get permission from local authorities to mount a similar campaign on public buses, rented one of their own to carry the message. In grand teutonic style it carefully announced: "There is (with probability bounding on certainty) no God. A fulfilled life needs no faith." As the bus toured Germany it was shadowed by another, similar, vehicle, hired this time by Christians. It, more modestly, simply asked a question: "And what if He does exist?" The media were delighted at the sight of both buses parked together in city after city. The net effect? God was firmly on the agenda.

Now I imagine that the word "probably" may well have been included for legal reasons, to avoid prosecution under trade-description legislation. The atheists realize, of course, that they could not amass enough evidence to convince a court that the probability of God's existence was zero; and if it is not zero, then God's existence is possible. Come to think of it, the *a priori* probability of Richard Dawkins' existence is very low. His existence, like that of the rest of us, is improbable. In spite of that, lo and behold, Richard Dawkins, you and I, are all actual. The message on the bus is beside the point. The real question is not, "How probable is God?" but rather, "Is there evidence that God is actual?"

If we have not yet boarded the atheist bus, we might well want to ask what kind of a God is it whose existence is deemed improbable? The slogan proudly informs us that it is a God whose existence is associated (at least in atheist minds) with worry and lack of enjoyment – no doubt with the implication that atheism is the fount of joy that will dismiss this gloomy God and alleviate all of life's concerns.

Mathematician David Berlinski comes in with a reality check:

> **The thesis that *if* there is no God, then disbelievers may contemplate many new enjoyments prompts an obvious question. Have atheists, at least, stopped worrying and begun to enjoy their lives? To be sure, it has not been widely observed that prominent atheists have in recent years blistered their conscience with anxiety. Short of retiring into a coma, it is hard to imagine how Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett or Christopher Hitchens could have stopped worrying more than they had already stopped worrying and so hard to credit atheism for their ebullience.**

Berlinski continues:

> **Those considering atheism as a *new* doctrinal commitment, however, will not find plausible the alleviation of anxiety it is said to afford. If the great concern occasioned by atheism is God's indignation, then given the very tentative way in which his *in*existence has been affirmed, it might seem that atheists have drawn their worries prematurely to an end. Whatever its other benefits, atheism is not generally counted a position calculated to assuage the worst fears of mankind; and as the work of prominent atheists indicates, those who *have* stopped worrying have done so only because they have stopped thinking.**[13]

One of those prominent atheists, Jean-Paul Sartre, said: "Atheism is a long, hard, cruel business." Might it not, therefore, rather be that worry is part and parcel of the *rejection* of God rather than a consequence of belief in him? And might it not be wise then to ask exactly where the atheist bus is headed before jumping on board? Slogans on the side of a bus can distract one from noticing the bus's destination.

But the atheists' poster campaign did not end here. In 2009 Richard Dawkins and the British Humanist Association commissioned posters depicting two very happy looking children with the legend: "Please don't label me. Let me grow up and choose for myself." However, in an exquisitely ironical contradiction of their first poster campaign's claim, that atheism was the prerequisite for joy, it turned out that the grinning children, selected by the atheists to embody their vision of childlike happiness, were children from a devout Christian family. As the father of the children commented, it was quite a compliment that the atheists judged these particular children to be happy and free, without knowing about their family background.[14]

I shall comment later on why I am in fact sympathetic to the atheists' desire not to have children labelled and to allow them to choose for themselves. The question of parents teaching children what they believe is, of course, a very different matter.

At the moment, Richard Dawkins would appear to be the principal driver of the atheist bus. Like him, I am a scientist (a mathematician in fact); like him, I believe in truth; and also like him, I am a professor at Oxford University. But, unlike him, I am a theist – a Christian, to be precise. I do not associate the existence of God as such with worry, but rather with joy. Indeed, if I were impelled to come up with a bus

slogan, it might go something like this: "There is good evidence for the existence of God. Therefore trust him and experience real joy." Of course, I am aware that God might be a potential source of worry for atheists. After all, as Lucretius noted centuries ago, if God exists, atheists will meet him one day. More of that in due course.

Richard Dawkins and I have engaged in two major public debates, the first in Birmingham, Alabama in 2007, where we discussed some of the major theses of his best-selling book *The God Delusion*.[15] The second debate was on the question "Has Science Buried God?", which is the subtitle of my own book, *God's Undertaker*.[16] This latter debate[17] was held in 2008 in the Oxford Natural History Museum, the place where in 1860 Thomas Henry Huxley had his famous interchange with Bishop Samuel Wilberforce over Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. The setting was both unusual and dramatic. Dawkins and I were perched on stools, with the vast head and jaws of the museum's showpiece, the Tyrannosaurus Rex skeleton, towering threateningly above us. T-Rex is certainly extinct. On that Dawkins and I agree. Dawkins also thinks God is extinct, or, more exactly, that he never existed. I disagree.

I also have had two public debates with Christopher Hitchens, who describes himself as a contrarian. Our first encounter was before a large audience in the Usher Hall at the Edinburgh Festival in 2008, where the motion under consideration was "The New Europe should prefer the New Atheism."[18] At the end of the debate a number of members of the audience, who had initially indicated their indecision on the issue, surprised many by moving to reject the motion. Consequently it was pronounced lost by the moderator, James Naughtie of the BBC, when Hitchens graciously conceded. One member of the audience who did not contribute to that shift of opinion was Richard Dawkins. He did not seem to be at all pleased with the outcome.

I met Hitchens again in March 2009 for an equally lively re-match. This was an even larger event, organized by the Socratic Club at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama. The issue before the house was "Is God Great?" – the topic of Hitchens' best-seller.[19] Not surprisingly, perhaps, no vote was taken on that occasion.

I have also debated the physicist Victor Stenger (among others) in Australia at an IQ^2 Debate [20] organized by *The Sydney Morning Herald* in August 2008, on the topic "The world would be better off without religion." As part of Sydney Science Week 2008 I encountered Michael

Shermer, the editor of *Sceptic Magazine*, to debate the question "Does God exist?" In July 2009 I had a lengthy moderated discussion for Australian Television with Peter Atkins, Emeritus Professor of Chemistry at Oxford.[21] In addition, in April 2011 I engaged in a very warm-hearted public discussion with Daniel Lowenstein, Professor of Law at UCLA on the topic "Is Christianity true?"[22]

That brings me to my motivation for this book. In each of my debates and discussions I have tried to present in the public space a credible, rational alternative to the fare which the New Atheists offer, rather than simply attempting to use rhetoric or emotional appeal to "win" the argument on the day. Whether I have succeeded or not is up to the respective audiences to judge. However, these public events do not, of course, permit full development of arguments. I thought it worthwhile, therefore, to draw from such experience and give in book form a more thorough presentation of the central issues.

I have already written at length on the science aspect in my book *God's Undertaker*; and have addressed the more recent entry into the debate by Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow in a further book *God and Stephen Hawking: Whose Design is it Anyway?*[23] Because of their topicality I shall include some of the flavour of these arguments here. The main debate, however, is not limited to science. Indeed, the arguments that often grip the attention of the general public have to do with morality and the alleged dangers of religion. These issues will be our main concern here.

Other authors have paved the way. Alister and Joanna McGrath have impressively deconstructed many of the major arguments in *The Dawkins Delusion?*;[24] as has Keith Ward in *Why There Almost Certainly Is a God*.[25] At a more accessible level, David Robertson's *The Dawkins Letters* is an excellent guide.[26] More recently David Bentley Hart, in *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*,[27] very effectively exposes the superficiality of the New Atheist approach to history. One might ask, so why add yet another book?

The New Atheists want to "raise the consciousness" of atheists and encourage them to stand up and be counted for their faith. Hence they are constantly adding to the ranks of their spokespeople. They are out to get converts.[28] The importance of the issues and the extent of public interest warrant analysis of the New Atheism arguments from as many different angles as possible, so that everybody's "consciousness is raised" – including that of Christians.

My aim is to provide one of these angles, in the hope that it will be of help. This book is not simply a product of passive analysis, important though that is. It is a product of public engagement with the New Atheists and their ideas. I have stepped into the public arena in order to add my voice to those who are convinced that the New Atheism is not the automatic default position for all thinking people who hold science in high regard. Like me, there are many scientists and others who think that the New Atheism is a belief system which, ironically, provides a classic example of the blind faith it so vocally despises in others. I should like to make my own small contribution towards raising public awareness of this fact.

I have, however, a further reason for writing. The debate has necessarily given prominence to atheist arguments and reactions to them, which means that the positive presentation of the alternative tends to come short. Perhaps it is for this reason that the New Atheists incessantly chant Bertrand Russell's famous mantra about there not being enough evidence. In light of this, I propose in this book not only to deal reactively with atheist objections to Christianity, but also positively to present detailed evidence for the truth of Christianity.

I would like to express my thanks to the many people who over the years have stimulated my thinking on these issues, including those representatives of the atheist worldview that I have encountered in both public debate and private conversation. I am also grateful to my research assistant Simon Wenham and to Barbara Hamilton for her invaluable help with the production of the typescript.

THE CHARGE OF THE BRIGHT BRIGADE

The New Atheists regard themselves as distinguished and worthy offspring of the Enlightenment, and, in an attempt to jettison the negative image they feel atheism has had hitherto, they have accordingly styled themselves as "the Brights". Christopher Hitchens deserves credit for objecting to such a "conceited cringe-making proposal".[29] Just imagine what the reaction would have been had the Christians equally foolishly and condescendingly called themselves "the Clevers".

No doubt those of us who disagree with the Brights will by default be dubbed "the Dims" or "Dulls", or perhaps even "Darks". Dennett, however, says that this is not necessarily the case, and that those who

believe in the supernatural should call themselves the "Supers".[30] "Super-Bright", therefore, would be an oxymoron.

Hitchens' objection to this rather tasteless bit of hubris has been ignored; and the Brights have now staked their claim to a piece of cyberspace by setting up a dedicated multilingual website under that name. We find there the following explanation of the term: "A bright is a person who has a naturalistic worldview. A bright's worldview is free of supernatural and mystical elements. The ethics and actions of a bright are based on a naturalistic worldview."

As children of the Enlightenment, the Brights see themselves as luminaries of a new era of rational understanding, dispelling the darkness of religious superstition and error. Michel Onfray displays a rather limited memory in explaining their objectives thus: "We need a return to the spirit of Light, of Enlightenment, that gave its name to the eighteenth century"; as if there was no high calibre intellectual discussion before the eighteenth century, and, as Alasdair MacIntyre points out,[31] as if the Enlightenment project was not a failure in its ability to supply a foundation for morality. As if the Enlightenment took us on an upward path from barbarism to peace, instead of ushering in one violent revolution after another until we reached the depths of human wickedness in the bloodiest century to date – the twentieth.[32] In its headlong charge, the Bright Brigade does not appear to wish to pause and consider such things. We must, however – and we shall.

WHAT IS NEW ABOUT THE NEW ATHEISTS?

The New Atheists have been around for some time now; so, in that trivial sense, they are no longer new. What is more, at the intellectual level, their arguments never were really new. However, the new thing about them is their tone and their emphasis. The New Atheists are much louder and shriller than their predecessors. They are also more aggressive. This change in tone centres on the fact that they are no longer content simply to deny God's existence. For instance, Christopher Hitchens says: "I'm not even an atheist so much as I am an antitheist; I not only maintain that all religions are versions of the same untruth, but I hold that the influence of churches, and the effect of religious belief is positively harmful."[33] The agenda of the New

Atheists has widened, therefore, to include attack on the existence of belief itself. This particular feature is described by them as their way of expressing their "loss of respect" for religion. As Richard Dawkins puts it, "I am utterly fed up with the respect we have been brainwashed into bestowing upon religion." Christopher Hitchens sums up the position in his all-encompassing, and characteristically wild, statement: "Religion poisons everything."[34] Bradley Hagerty on National Public Radio reports Hitchens as saying (to roars of approval from a capacity audience at the University of Toronto): "I think religion should be treated with ridicule, hatred, and contempt, and I claim that right."[35] Sam Harris's intention is "to destroy the intellectual and moral pretensions of Christianity in its most committed forms".[36]

WHY THE AGGRESSION?

Something appears to have snapped. And it has: the Twin Towers on 9/11. According to the leading German weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel*, it was that horrific event in 2001 that gave birth to the New Atheism. A cover article entitled "God is to blame for everything"[37] says: "Without the attacks on New York and Washington, there would be no New Atheism." In a later interview with the same magazine, Dawkins says that 9/11 "radicalised" him,[38] thus confirming his earlier statement:

> **My last vestige of "hands-off religion" respect disappeared in the smoke and choking dust of September 11, 2001, followed by the "National Day of Prayer", when prelates and pastors did their tremulous Martin Luther King impersonation and urged people of mutually incompatible faiths to hold hands, united in homage to the very force that caused the problem in the first place.[39]**

The logic is simple. "Imagine with John Lennon," says Dawkins, "a world without religion. Imagine no suicide bombers, no 9/11, no 7/7, no Crusades, no witch-hunts, no Gunpowder plot, no Indian partition, no Israeli/Palestinian wars, no Serb/Croat/Muslim massacres, no persecution of Jews as 'Christ-killers', no Northern Ireland 'troubles', no 'honour killings', no shiny-suited bouffant-haired televangelists

fleecing gullible people of their money ('God wants you to give till it hurts'). Imagine no Taliban to blow up ancient statues, no public beheadings of blasphemers, no flogging of female skin for the crime of showing an inch of it."[40]

This message resonates powerfully in a world rendered fearful by fanatical acts of terror perpetrated by extremists. Which of us, apart from the violent themselves, would not like a world purged of such horrors? Most of us have no hesitation in agreeing with the New Atheists that there are problems, major problems, with aspects of religion. How could we "respect" religious extremists that encourage young men and women to become living bombs in order to gain instant access to paradise? The New Atheists are quite right in drawing attention to this kind of thing, especially in societies that are in danger of having public discourse paralysed by political correctness.

In page after page the New Atheists spell out in lurid detail the tragic history of horror and evil associated with religion – from the atrocious acts of fundamentalist Islamic suicide bombers, killing and maiming their innocent victims, to the unspeakable abuse of children by priests, robbing them of their childhood innocence and often inflicting on them brutal and permanent psychological trauma; from the fearful brainwashing of the cults, to the ethnic cleansing of the Balkans, and the kneecappings and shootings inflicted on each other by extremist Protestants and Roman Catholics in Northern Ireland. Indeed, a cursory glance around the world at the moment shows that not only are there wars between different religious groups, but vicious fighting between various factions of the same religious group. It is a sickening litany. Religion would certainly appear to be a major problem.

Well then, if religion is the problem, then the solution is obvious, say the New Atheists: get rid of religion. Civilized society, they say, can no longer afford the luxury of smiling indulgently at religion that has become far too dangerous and extreme for such complacency. It must therefore be eliminated; and Nobel Laureate Steven Weinberg, for one, has no hesitation in saying so: "The world needs to wake up from the long nightmare of religion… Anything we scientists can do to weaken the hold of religion should be done, and may in fact be our greatest contribution to civilization."

That is the New Atheists' stated goal in a nutshell; and the observant reader will not miss the totalitarian sounding word "anything" in Weinberg's statement.[41] Dawkins states the goal this way: "If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when

they put it down,"[42] even though in his next sentence he recognizes that this might just be presumptuous optimism. He wants not only to rally the faithful (atheists) and to encourage them to "come out" for their faith (for such it is, despite their protests to the contrary as we shall see); but also to proselytize – to "raise the consciousness" of others, by describing the attractions of the New Atheism – thus increasing the footprint of atheism on the demographic landscape.

THE RELIGIOUS LANDSCAPE

To gain some idea of what that landscape looks like, we refer to a YouGov poll in the UK, commissioned by the BBC broadcaster John Humphrys in 2007. According to it, 16 per cent of the 2,200 polled called themselves atheists; 28 per cent believed in God; 26 per cent believed in "something" but were not sure what; 9 per cent regarded themselves as agnostics, among them Humphrys himself; 5 per cent said they would like to believe and envied those who did, but couldn't; 3 per cent didn't know; 10 per cent hadn't given it much thought; and 3% gave the response "other".[43] It is interesting to set these figures in the wider context of an earlier (2004) international survey of ten countries, again commissioned by the BBC, entitled "What the world thinks of God".[44]

Overall, about 8 per cent of those polled considered themselves to be atheists; so the UK came out at about twice that average with the highest percentage of atheists – 16 per cent. In the USA about 10 per cent said they did not believe in God; although a 2005 Gallup poll put the figure much lower, at 5 per cent. An internet trawl through a selection of recent polls seems to indicate that more people are comfortable with making the negative statement, that they do not believe in God, than the positive statement, that they are atheists – however illogical that may seem. For instance, the *American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS)* conducted in 2001 gives the figure for atheists in the USA as 0.4 per cent, although 14 per cent identify themselves as non-religious.[45]

However interesting these figures may be as indicators of the uphill nature of the New Atheists' struggle to gain a hearing, the central issue, whether their atheism is true or not, is not going to be settled by mere recourse to statistical analysis. To ascertain truth, we need more robust evidence than that.

THE NEW ATHEISM AND TRUTH

One refreshing feature of the New Atheism is that it is not noticeably influenced by postmodernist relativism, at least in the realm of truth. Richard Dawkins amusingly writes: “Show me a cultural relativist at 30,000 feet and I’ll show you a hypocrite.”[46] Addressing his Christian readers, Sam Harris says, “I would like to acknowledge that there are many points on which you and I agree. We agree, for instance, that if one of us is right, the other is wrong.” The New Atheists believe therefore that truth exists that is accessible to the human mind. They accept the law of the excluded middle – either this universe is all that there is, or it isn’t; either there is a God, or there isn’t; either the resurrection of Jesus happened, or it didn’t. In that sense they are thoroughly modernist in persuasion. This means, in particular, that we can be clear from the start what it is we are talking about; we have at least some basis for rational debate.

IN PLACE OF GOD

In 2006 a conference took place at the Salk Institute, La Jolla, California, on the theme “Beyond Belief: Science, Religion, Reason, and Survival”. Its remit was to address three questions: Should science do away with religion? What would science put in religion’s place? Can we be good without God? Leading New Atheists like Richard Dawkins and Steven Weinberg were among the speakers. *The New Scientist* judged this conference to be of such importance that, in its fiftieth anniversary special edition, it included a report of it in an article entitled, “In place of God”.[47]

This title reveals that the objective of the New Atheists is not simply to complete the process of secularization by banishing God from the universe; but it is to put something in place of God. And it is not simply that society should replace God with something else; it is that science should do so. Apparently no area of human thought or activity other than science is qualified to contribute anything useful. Science is king. Of course, science is a set of disciplines practised by human beings; so the ultimate objective would appear to be to make these scientists the ultimate arbiter of what is not only to be believed by all other human beings, but what is to be worshipped by them –

remember it is God they wish to replace. Do we detect more shades of totalitarianism?

The first two questions on the La Jolla conference agenda show that propagating atheism is part of a wider goal, the enthronement of science as supreme. This aim has powerful echoes of the similar crusade of T. H. Huxley in the years following the publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species*. Huxley saw Darwin's theory as his main weapon to loosen the grip of Christianity and achieve the secularization of society through the domination of science. In 1874 this theme was evident at a famous meeting of the British Association in Belfast, at which Huxley, J. D. Hooker (botanist), and John Tyndall (President of the British Association for Science – who worked on atmospheric gases), were main speakers. Tyndall said: "All religious theories must submit to the control of science and relinquish all thought of controlling it."[48]

THE MORAL DIMENSION

Inevitably, therefore, the New Atheists have to tackle the issue of morality and ethics. That is why the third question (Can we be good without God?) appears on the conference agenda, even though it might seem incongruous at first sight. The conference organizers clearly felt they had to address the incontrovertible fact that for centuries the source of morality, at least in the West, has been the Judaeo-Christian tradition. The New Atheists wish to abolish religion, so they have to solve the problem of giving an alternative source for morality, not least because their main attack on religion is that it is not only intellectually but morally wrong.

We can therefore express the major elements in the New Atheists' agenda as follows:

1. Religion is a dangerous delusion: it leads to violence and war.
2. We must therefore get rid of religion: science will achieve that.
3. We do not need God to be good: atheism can provide a perfectly adequate base for ethics.

SOME DEFINITIONS

We need first to say something about the meaning of the terms "atheism" and "religion". According to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), atheism (a-theism) is "disbelief in or denial of the existence of a God". The OED cites Shaftesbury (1709): "To believe nothing of a designing Principle or Mind, nor any Cause, Measure or Rule of things but Chance… is to be a perfect atheist." Dawkins (citing Steven Weinberg) defines his concept of God: "If the word 'God' is not to become completely useless, it should be used in the way people have generally understood it: to denote a supernatural creator that is 'appropriate for us to worship'."[49] Dawkins' stated antipathy, therefore, is only to what he calls "supernatural gods". They are the delusional gods and are to be distinguished from the God of some (enlightened – according to Dawkins) scientists and philosophers, where the term "God" has become a synonym for the laws of nature, or for some kind of cosmic natural intelligence that, although superior to human intelligence, ultimately evolved from the primitive stuff of the universe like any other lesser intelligence. Thus, the principle target of the New Atheists is the supernatural God of the Bible, who is the Maker and Upholder of the universe.

I use the term "target" in order to draw attention to the fact that the New Atheists are not simply atheists. They are perhaps better described as anti-theists, by contrast with the type of atheist who, though she does not believe in God herself, is quite happy for others to believe in God provided they do not disturb her.

One corollary of their anti-theism is that by "religion" the New Atheists have particularly in mind the great monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, with the main emphasis being on Christianity. Pantheistic religions like Hinduism, and religions that could reasonably be alternatively classified as philosophies, like Confucianism and certain forms of Buddhism, play little or no role in New Atheist literature.

I grew up in Northern Ireland and can understand those who think that the only solution to the world's problems is to get rid of religion. But, precisely because I was brought up in Northern Ireland and nevertheless remain a convinced Christian, I may just have a contribution to make in correcting what I feel is a disquietingly dangerous imbalance in the logic of the New Atheists' approach, both in terms of the diagnosis they make and the solution they propose.

I am not alone in that disquiet. Many atheists share it. Barbara Hagerty, in her NPR report[50] mentioned previously, points out that the reaction to increased atheist aggressiveness has not met with universal approval among atheists. She cites atheist Paul Kurtz on the New Atheists: "I consider them atheist fundamentalists. They're anti-religious and they're mean-spirited, unfortunately. Now, they're very good atheists and very dedicated people who do not believe in God. But you have this aggressive and militant phase of atheism, and that does more damage than good." The interesting thing here is that Paul Kurtz was the founder of the Center for Inquiry, whose mission is to "foster a secular society based on science, reason, freedom of inquiry, and humanist values", and which is the organizer of a "Blasphemy Contest" that invites contestants to submit short statements critical of religious beliefs. Hagerty reported that Kurtz claims to have been ousted from his position at the Center for Inquiry by a "palace coup".

Atheists are clearly divided about the aggressive approach of the New Atheists, and some find it positively embarrassing. Their embarrassment echoes that of philosopher Michael Ruse when he penned the following endorsement for the McGraths' book, *The Dawkins Delusion?*:[51] "*The God Delusion* makes me embarrassed to be an atheist and the McGraths show why." For this reason it is important to realize from the outset that the New Atheists are far from being representative of all atheists. Indeed, many of my atheist friends and acquaintances are, not surprisingly, at pains to distance themselves from the aggressiveness of the New Atheists.

The agnostic fraternity is also disturbed by the New Atheist onslaught. In his book *In God We Doubt*,[52] the well-known BBC Radio Presenter John Humphrys presents the main ideas of the New Atheists, and his responses to them, in his inimical, pithy way. It goes like this:[53]

1. **Believers are mostly naive or stupid. Or, at least, they're not as clever as atheists.**

   Response: This is so clearly untrue it's barely worth bothering with. Richard Dawkins, in his bestselling **The God Delusion,** ***was reduced to producing a "study" by Mensa that purported to show an inverse relationship between intelligence and belief. He also claimed that only a very few members of the Royal Society believe in a personal god. So what? Some believers are undoubtedly stupid (witness the***

creationists) but I've met one or two atheists I wouldn't trust to change a light-bulb.

2. **The few clever ones are pathetic because they need a crutch to get them through life.**

   Response: Don't we all? Some use booze rather than the Bible. It doesn't prove anything about either.

3. **They are also pathetic because they can't accept the finality of death.**

   Response: Maybe, but it doesn't mean they're wrong. Count the number of atheists in the foxholes or the cancer wards.

4. **They have been brainwashed into believing. There is no such thing as a "Christian child", for instance – just a child whose parents have had her baptised.**

   Response: True, and many children reject it when they get older. But many others stay with it.

5. **They have been bullied into believing.**

   Response: This is also true in many cases but you can't actually bully someone into believing – just into pretending to believe.

6. **If we don't wipe out religious belief by next Thursday week, civilisation as we know it is doomed.**

   Response: Of course the mad mullahs are dangerous and extreme Islamism is a threat to be taken seriously. But we've survived monotheist religion for 4,000 years or so, and I can think of one or two other things that are a greater threat to civilisation.

7. **Trust me: I'm an atheist.**

   Response: Why?

   ***Humphrys adds wryly: "I make no apology if I have oversimplified their views with that little list: it's what they do to believers all the time."* Quite so!**

More needs to be said, of course. But this kind of reaction on the part of John Humphrys, who is a highly intelligent person with no religious affiliation (he classifies himself as a doubter), serves to show

why many people are left uneasy by the New Atheists' message. They find it unbalanced and often extreme in many places; at best unsubstantiated and at worst plainly wrong. Dawkins is constantly encouraging us to be critical; but we shall see that he himself is highly selective in what he chooses to criticize, and indeed in what he understands by criticism.

THE IRONY OF THE ATTEMPT TO ELIMINATE RELIGION

One of the ironies emerging about the New Atheists has to do with the fact that they assign an important role to evolutionary theory[54] in their attempt to annihilate religious belief. However, evolution does not appear to be playing ball! *The Sunday Times*[55] ran an article by the science editor John Leake, entitled, "Atheists are a dying breed as nature 'favours faithful'". He reports on an eighty-two country study entitled *The Reproductive Advantage of Religiosity*, led by Michael Blume of Jena, which found that those whose inhabitants worship at least once a week have 2.5 children each, and those who never worship have 1.7 – which is less than the number needed to replace themselves. Leake contrasts Dawkins' argument that religions are like mental viruses that infect people and impose great costs in terms of money and health risks, with Blume's work, which suggests the opposite: evolution favours believers so strongly that over time a tendency to be religious has become embedded in our genes.

One might have thought that, if the New Atheists are right about evolution, they, of all people, would be the most enthusiastic about spreading their genes. Clearly not.

Perhaps, then, all we have to do is wait?

However, perhaps not; for even though the New Atheists seem to have lost interest in spreading their genes they have not yet abandoned the propagation of their "memes".